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“Connecting Honors for All”: Reimagining the Two-Year Honors Program in the Age of Guided Pathways

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Abstract: Over the past three years, honors faculty at South Florida State College, a two-year college offering a limited number of work-force baccalaureates, have reinvented their program. Rather than the themed seminars and exploratory courses popular with an earlier generation, our honors courses now offer students project-based, faculty-guided opportunities for undergraduate research within our general education course sequence. Students thus participate in honors while meeting their state- and program-specific general education requirements, and they do not run the risk of jeopardizing their financial aid by incurring “excess hours.” This focus allows us to connect honors education to the vocationally oriented goals most of our students bring to their educations. We use a model of honors education developed in the technical universities of The Netherlands, which we are now adapting to a two-year college in the

United States. Our purposes are aligned with theirs: to make honors education available to talented students seeking a career or technical degree rather than a liberal arts baccalaureate.

Keywords: two-year colleges, honors programs, guided pathways, European honors education

INTRODUCTION

Although causes for optimism are in short supply at two-year colleges and in higher education generally, individual program and projects create hope for the future. Over the past three years, honors faculty at South Florida State College (SFSC) have reimagined their program under one guiding principle: that excellence, and a commitment to excellence, together with a wider understanding of their purposes for being in the world, can be developed in students whose college and career paths may lie outside traditional liberal arts majors. In developing this approach to honors education, we have drawn on three models: two learned through practice and one theoretical. We discovered the practices first and the theory that supported them only afterward.

The first change in practice we adopted was to refocus our honors courses on undergraduate research projects, which we embedded in standard courses that students could use to meet their state- and program-specific general education requirements. The second was to extend this model of embedded undergraduate research to honors general education courses in the humanities and social sciences with support from a National Endowment for the Humanities grant through their Community College Initiatives program.

The theoretical model for our developing practices was the last to arrive. At the 2018 Honors International Faculty Institute in Groningen, The Netherlands, I became acquainted with the research of Marca V. C. Wolfensberger and her European colleagues on honors pedagogy and practices. This body of work is enabling us to codify and reflect on our own existing practices and to innovate with theoretical guidance. The consequence is that South Florida State College is now explicitly adapting a model of honors education developed in the technical universities of The Netherlands to a two-year comprehensive community college in the United States that also offers a limited number of workforce baccalaureates. Our purpose in so doing is to make honors education available to talented students whose educational orientation is toward a career or technical workforce degree rather than to the traditional liberal arts.

OUR SITUATION AND ITS CHALLENGES

Our location and demographics present us with a group of challenges that are common to many two- and four-year public colleges and universities in the United States today. The tri-county area served by South Florida State College is rural and thinly populated; taken together, the area has less than 1% of Florida's population, and the population is static ("Quick Facts: DeSoto; Hardee; Highlands"). The largest, wealthiest, and best educated of the three counties, Highlands, skews heavily toward the elderly: nearly 35% of its residents are over age 65, most living on fixed incomes. Residents identifying as Hispanic or Latinx make up about 20% of the Highlands County population as of the last census but are a slight majority both in the SFSC honors program and in its Phi Theta Kappa chapter membership. Residents identifying as Black make up about 10% of the population and are an equal percentage of the SFSC honors program.

Overall, educational attainment in Highlands County is considerably below the Florida average. Just 17.1% of residents over 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher. The corresponding proportion in both Hardee and DeSoto Counties is below 12%. Nearly 20% of all Highlands County residents and 33% of its school-age children live at or below the poverty level ("Quick Facts: Highlands").

In all three counties, there were fewer jobs in 2017 than in 2007, just before the Great Recession (Klas). Apart from education, government, and health care, most of these jobs are in low-wage service industries, which offer few benefits. The largest employer in Highlands County is Florida Hospital Heartland (Advent Health), followed by the School Board of Highlands County. Walmart is third; Agero, a call center specializing in roadside assistance, is fourth; and SFSC is fifth ("County Profile"). Except for the high number of elderly people, which is probably Florida-specific, the demographics of Highlands County are fairly typical for present-day rural America.

The great majority of SFSC's students, whatever their talent level, have chosen to make workforce and career education their college goal. In this aim, they have the support of their parents, peers, teachers, and community, which is not surprising given the community demographics. Few visible alternative possibilities are available locally. Students growing up in a poor, rural area with low college attainment have had few educated professionals to serve as role models for achievement. Moreover, as a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center found, a majority of people without a college education, like the

overwhelming majority of the population in the area SFSC serves, believe that “the main purpose of a college education is to teach work-related skills and knowledge” (“Is College”). Students have had this viewpoint substantially reinforced in their families and communities, and persons identifying as conservative have recently tended to become skeptical of the benefits of a traditional college education (“Is College”); Highlands County, in which two-thirds of the voters in the 2016 presidential election cast their votes for Donald Trump, is a conservative stronghold (“Highlands County”), and it may well be that this skeptical viewpoint influences our students as they plan for college.

On the other hand, students at SFSC often have a tremendous drive to get out of poverty. They want above all else to acquire a skill and earn enough to support themselves and their families. For these students, a short, inexpensive, career-focused college degree or certificate may answer their most pressing needs and may be all they can afford. In an era of diminishing state and federal support for colleges and universities, nearly three-quarters of Americans have come to doubt that traditional college is still affordable (“Is College”). Even the most talented of our students may find the prospect of four years of university tuition plus graduate school, with the accompanying loan burden and uncertain employment prospects, too much of a risk to undertake, particularly without the example of successful local role models. Nevertheless, in the interests of equity, talented and motivated students should not be denied opportunities for personal and intellectual growth if they desire them, whatever their career focus and educational plans. As honors director, in consideration of these circumstances, I began several years ago to review alternate options for honors education.

UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH AND THE TWO-YEAR SCIENCE STUDENT

The beginnings of the change in our honors program date back to July of 2014, when a group of four SFSC faculty, including myself, attended the Council of Undergraduate Research conference, “Developing Undergraduate Research at Community Colleges: Tapping the Potential of All Students,” chaired by Eddie Weller of San Jacinto College. This conference inspired in us a new focus on undergraduate research, strategized as research projects embedded in honors courses that also met the requirements of the general education curriculum.

I found the most important part of the vision presented at the CUR workshop to be the definition of an authentic research project at the undergraduate level: one having an open-ended answer. That is, the answer to the research question is not known in advance either by the students or the course instructor. Student research activity thus produces a significant part of the content of the course, and students become, in Barr and Tagg's well-known phrase, "active discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge." A metacognitive approach to learning encourages students to set research goals and monitor their progress in achieving them, yet, far from being an unguided free-for-all, the CUR metacognitive approach presumes that students have "a deep foundation of factual knowledge," which they both understand "in the context of a conceptual framework," and are able to "organize knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and application" ("What Is"). Students in this model do research under the guidance of an instructor, but, as Barr and Tagg write, "the chief agent in the process [of learning] is the learner."

The SFSC faculty who responded most immediately to the challenge of designing undergraduate research projects embedded in general education courses were, not surprisingly, members of our natural sciences department. Through their leadership, ongoing research projects have now been embedded in honors-designated sections of General Biology I and II. Since General Biology I is one of the general education core courses in Florida while the two-course sequence is recommended only for science majors, students' normal progress to their degrees will not be disrupted by taking advantage of research opportunities in honors sections. These sections are cross-listed with regular sections of the course, so that the course overall can "make" even though few students may enroll in the research project sections.

Currently, one honors biology student is assessing potential bacterial contamination of lipstick testers at drug and department store cosmetic counters. A three-student research team checks canine "liquid biopsies" (that is, dogs' blood samples, donated by local veterinarians) for micro-RNA markers showing the presence of canine congestive heart failure. Though congestive heart failure is at present incurable, supportive treatments exist that dog owners can use if they know their dog is beginning to develop the condition. Humans, of course, are also subject to congestive heart failure, and the three students and their faculty research team leader hope that their work may someday make a contribution to a cure in humans as well as dogs.

A research project developed for an honors sociology course connects students with the Florida nonprofit agency Healthy Families. Each student researches an ethnic community in Highlands County that has been identified

as underserved by Healthy Families' programs. Using as a framework the sociological understandings gained in their course, they prepared recommendations for improving agency contacts with the communities and presented their results in a symposium that included in the audience case workers and managers with Healthy Families. Applying what they had learned to an authentic research project, these honors students also contributed to the well-being of Healthy Families' clients and the community at large.

AUTHENTIC GUIDED RESEARCH FOR THE HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

The second step in the redesign of SFSC's honors program occurred when a core group of humanities and social sciences faculty received support through the National Endowment for the Humanities Community College Initiative for development of significant undergraduate research projects in their disciplines. Through the grant, for which I was project director, visiting scholars traveled to our campus to lead small faculty seminars, followed by intensive discussion sessions among our own faculty. For instance, the archaeologist Jerald T. Milanich, who is probably the leading expert in the indigenous peoples of Florida prior to and during the European contact period, gave talks to our faculty in his areas of expertise, and Leslie Kemp Poole discussed her area of expertise, the often-neglected role played by women's activism in a century's worth of Florida environmental movements. The effect was to refresh our own disciplinary expertise while building community among ourselves. Core faculty are now in the process of reshaping their honors humanities and social sciences courses through the inclusion of curricular modules that enable student research in these disciplines.

Several research projects deriving from the NEH grant have already been piloted, and others are planned. Our studio art instructor has been inspired by Milanich's talks to adapt indigenous Floridians' methods of open-pit pottery firing for her classes. She has since guided her students through two pit firings using indigenous techniques, which can be considered an act of reparation and homage rather than cultural appropriation. As readers may know, the indigenous inhabitants of the Florida peninsula were entirely wiped out within three centuries of first contact with Europeans by epidemics (influenza, tuberculosis, measles, and smallpox being the main killers) together with Spanish ill-treatment of forced laborers and, especially, according to Milanich, the butchery inflicted on them by English raiders of Spanish colonies. Some

scattered groups, however, were able to survive into the eighteenth century in the inaccessible Highlands County area and have left artifacts attesting to their one-time presence.

One of our humanities students, in a project that draws its general inspiration from the grant activities, has been digitizing primary source documents for a local organization, the Sebring Historical Society Archives, and another has done similar work for the Avon Park Historical Society. As one of our visiting scholars, James M. Denham, has made clear, the history of the rural South is little-known compared to that of the larger cities because the archival material is scattered, often poorly preserved and curated, and largely uncatalogued and inaccessible to researchers. These students are contributing to nationwide efforts to make rural and small-town archival material accessible again.

Other planned projects growing out of the visiting scholars and our own intra-faculty discussions include research into the all-Black communities that appeared in Central Florida after the Civil War. Zora Neale Hurston's hometown, Eatonville, is the best known, and Rosewood had the most tragic history, but there were others, including the little-studied Bealsville, located within a short distance of our college. Additionally, as Denham noted, the Polk County settlement of Homestead, just to our north, was founded during the Jim Crow era as a deliberately non-segregated town. Student investigation into the background and reasons for what was, at the time, a very contrarian decision, together with research into the all-Black settlements, will form part of this research project, which is still in development and will bring together faculty and students from across the disciplines of history, sociology, and literature.

Since many of our visiting scholars raised challenges to local, received views of Florida history and culture, ongoing faculty discussions have centered on the best way to present such challenges to our students. Developing a research project that asks students to sort out what is and is not fact or authoritative interpretation has interested many of our faculty. I am about to introduce a project for the honors students in my Introduction to Philosophy class that combines discussion in their textbook of recent challenges to Enlightenment understandings of rationality with additional readings and case studies on a problem of contemporary interest: "fake news" and "alternative facts."

Faculty involved in undergraduate research and project-based honors education have so far presented two showcases of faculty and student work.

The first occurred during our Convocation week in August, at which faculty outlined their projects and the rationale for them. The second, which featured primarily students in the natural sciences, was held in October. The third showcase for student and faculty work will be held February 21, 2019, in conjunction with a program open to the public that features visiting lecturers, the last major event of the NEH grant.

HONORS ON THE DUTCH MODEL: A THEORETICAL BASIS FOR OUR PRACTICE

The reimagining of the SFSC Honors Program received new impetus when I attended the Honors International Faculty Institute in Groningen, The Netherlands, in June of 2018. The ongoing effect of this stimulating colloquium, led by Marca V. C. Wolfensberger of The Netherlands, and Beata Jones and John Zubizarreta of the United States, provided us with a means to understand the practices we had been developing intuitively while continuing to move forward in a framework of sound theoretical understanding.

In brief, SFSC is in the process of aligning our practice with an honors model developed in the technical universities and colleges of The Netherlands, which is now spreading across the European Union. This model makes honors education available to students who are not pursuing liberal arts studies but readying themselves for employment in technical and career fields. A brief history and description of these Dutch initiatives might be useful as both the initiatives and their educational setting may not be well known in the United States.

Technical universities in The Netherlands would seem to be unpromising places for honor education to flourish. As in Europe generally, students in the Dutch technical universities do not have a general education component in their education. Instead, they follow heavily prescribed plans of study that leave little room for the sorts of in-depth explorations of liberal arts questions traditionally associated with honors education. Furthermore, Dutch education traditionally had been oriented toward egalitarianism, emphasizing inclusion and assistance for weaker students rather than talent development and excellence (Wolfensberger, *Talent* 49).

A change began with the Sirius Programme, a ministerial-level initiative from 2008 to promote “excellence in [Dutch] higher education,” in response to the demands of the knowledge economy (Wolfensberger, *Talent* 50–51). Although Sirius funding ended in 2014, the universities involved, including the technical universities, have continued their excellence initiatives with their

own funding (Wolfensberger, *Talent* 53). Thus, a robust network of higher education honors programs exists at present in The Netherlands. The Dutch approach to honors education emphasizes two factors worth consideration by American educators: rigorous research into the characteristics of effective practices and inter-university comparability of programs, the latter grounded in the Bologna process and the Erasmus program, which facilitate EU-wide student exchange between universities (Wolfensberger, *Talent* 50–52).

Often presented as “talent development,” Dutch technical university honors programs recruit students who “are talented and motivated to do something extra” and develop students’ talents within a “culture toward excellence” (Wolfensberger, *Talent* 14; 43). These students work on “inspiring and complex assignments and questions,” supplemental projects that require students to mobilize the knowledge they have gained in the standardized technical curriculum; some are discipline-focused, others multidisciplinary, but all require students to have good collaborative and communication skills as well as self-efficacy and perseverance because the problems have “non-obvious solutions” (“Welcome”).

The Dutch model of technical honors education, in short, challenges students to develop precisely those qualities that American employers claim to be seeking in their employees. Often, in fact, these projects are devised in collaboration with regional companies, who are also likely to be the students’ future employers.

The role of honors faculty in this model is threefold, corresponding to the “three pillars” of honors education defined by Kingma et al. as relatedness, competence, and autonomy (1). Faculty foster relatedness by using strategies that build community among teachers and learners, in which talented students are valued and encouraged to develop their talents, and motivated learners feel free to take the initiative. Faculty build competence by offering their own expertise to students and presenting them with demanding and challenging opportunities to gain knowledge; as Wolfensberger said during her first-day talk at the 2018 Honors International Faculty Institute, honors students want and need our expertise as scholar-teachers and seek out material with depth and complexity. Faculty build autonomy by offering freedom, further defined as “bounded freedom,” because, as Wolfensberger also said, self-regulation and autonomy are best learned when freedom is offered but does not overwhelm the student. In this model, as she describes it, students learn not passively through lectures but through active participation in tasks set by the instructor and guided by the instructor’s expert knowledge.

In short, technical universities in The Netherlands have found coherent, research-supported ways to practice honors pedagogy and foster excellence in students whose programs are geared toward career and workforce education. Our honors program at South Florida State College discovered that it had been feeling its way toward a model of honors education similar to that widely practiced in The Netherlands, but we have not yet attained the coherence and theoretical grounding of the Dutch model, which is a future direction for us at SFSC.

In particular, two significant areas have been under-explored and under-theorized in the SFSC Honors Program: authentic assessment (as opposed to narrowly focused rubric scoring) of embedded-research honors courses and development of a community of pedagogical practices among honors instructors. Over the next year, we will begin to bring these two areas into alignment with best practices, using the extensive literature and research on assessment and pedagogy in European honors produced by the circle around Wolfensberger.

RESPONDING TO CHANGES IN AMERICAN HIGHER EDUCATION

In certain respects, South Florida State College is just beginning the same journey that Dutch technical universities have made over the last twenty years. Our college has undergone at least two major changes in its mission since it was founded in 1965. Once a junior college offering local students the first two years of a traditional liberal arts education, we became a comprehensive community college some years later. Recently, by direction of the Florida legislature, we began to offer a limited number of workforce baccalaureate degrees in addition to technical certificates and two-year transfer and workforce degrees, thereby becoming what is termed in Florida a “state college.”

Through these changes, the Associate in Arts (A.A.) has remained the transfer degree for students planning to finish their education at one of Florida’s universities even though the original “seamless transfer” promised in Florida law has eroded over the years. Our traditional, liberal arts-focused honors program for A.A.-seeking students was intended to fit the seamless model.

In the last few years, however, an increasing focus on programmatic career education, together with a tightening of federal financial aid rules, has changed the emphasis of public college and university systems, and not only in Florida. Education for a workforce credential of some kind, whether earned at the two- or four-year level, is the new goal. Liberal arts courses have been

reconceptualized as general education requirements taken as part of a specified program sequence. Honors education of the traditional kind, whether at two- or four-year colleges, has suffered accordingly. Offering semester-length themed seminars and exploratory topics courses, the mainstays of an earlier generation of honors educators, has become, though not impossible, beset with difficulties at institutions such as ours.

For example, a Florida student wishing to earn an Associate in Arts degree and transfer to a state university finds that much of the degree path, including both general education requirements and prerequisites for admission to the student's choice of major, has already been prescribed in advance. The system leaves room for relatively few electives. Further, students relying on Pell Grants for college tuition are limited to 60 credit hours of financial aid for the A.A. or A.S. degree and cannot take courses not prescribed or permitted by their declared major or program. If they wish to take additional courses for enrichment or out of interest, they have to pay for them themselves.

The emphasis on education for career credentials has arguably led students to approach their general education courses with a box-checking mentality. Students often see them as burdens and choose to "get their gen eds out of the way" while still in high school through dual or concurrent enrollment, thus freeing more valuable college time for their career-focused courses. Unfortunately, the most academically able students often qualify for dual enrollment and so arrive at our college with the interest and ability to complete our honors program but with no room left in their program to do so.

The newly ubiquitous "guided pathways" movement is formalizing this change in higher education. Broad education, denigrated in the gray literature of guided pathways as a "cafeteria model," is being replaced in "community colleges and broad access four-year institutions" with a model "designed to address the need of today's students, who want to enter and complete programs that confer economically valuable certificates and degrees as quickly and efficiently as possible" ("Movement"). To this end, community colleges and public universities are being tasked with prescribing specific sequences of courses that lead as quickly as possible to specific career credentials, and general education requirements are to be prescribed by faculty not in the liberal arts but in career programs. As Rob Johnstone, one of the most vocal advocates for "guided pathways," expresses it, "accounting faculty should know better than anybody else which GE [general education] courses would best prepare somebody to serve as an accountant" (12).

Although this movement in higher education seems to reduce students to mere functions or tools by giving them no education apart from what they

will need on the job, it can be looked at from a different perspective as an attempt to remodel U.S. community colleges and non-selective public universities as European-style technical universities, focused on education for the career and the workforce.

The importance of the Dutch model of honors education to this American two-year honors director, then, is that it shows how excellence and a commitment to excellence, together with a wider understanding of one's purposes for being in the world, can be developed in students whose college and career paths lie outside traditional liberal arts majors; it also shows that in a knowledge economy, the traditional path is desirable. The trick, if I can call it that, is to embed the honors content in a general education course, using a project-based model of honors education that borrows heavily from the insights and methods of the undergraduate research community, extending that model to the humanities and social sciences and making it available to students in career and workforce programs.

The South Florida State College Honors Program is adapting to changes in the model of public higher education in America. With the potential to enrich talented and ambitious students seeking workforce degrees, this new model of honors education will offer in-depth, guided, experiential learning and reflection, assisting students to gain in commitment and orientation toward excellence. As Kathleen Knight Abowitz wrote in a classic 2006 article, "It is not educators' role to dissuade students from seeing college as a path to a career. It is our role to help students see the larger purpose in the work they choose" (16).

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